DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 318 SO 026 177

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TITLE Stalin's Crimes Revealed, 1936 and 1956. Educator's Guide. Live from the Past Series.
INSTITUTION New York Times Co., NY.
PUB DATE 1995-00-00
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communism; Fascism; Foreign Countries; Marxism; *Modern History; *Non Western Civilization; Secondary Education; Social Studies; Socialism; Totalitarianism; *World History
IDENTIFIERS *Stalin (Joseph); USSR

ABSTRACT

This guide provides an overview of the rise to power of Joseph Stalin and the legacy of Communist rule in the Soviet Union. The guide provides a listing of key events, a background essay, a list of components related to articles from "The New York Times" of the era, suggested activities, discussion questions, a list of key players related to the event, vocabulary terms, and suggested readings for further study. (EH)

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Stalin's Crimes Revealed, 1936 and 1956: Educator's Guide. Live from the Past Series.

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Educator's GUIDE

The New York Times Live FROM THE PAST

Stalin's Crimes Revealed, 1936 and 1956

After the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in November 1917, Vladimir Lenin and his followers became the new rulers of their vast country. The government structure of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R) and the political organization of the Communist Party replaced the authoritarian rule of the czar's government. Lenin chose to place powerful men like Joseph Stalin in key Communist Party leadership positions. In 1919, Stalin became a member of the elite Politburo of the Communist Party. After Lenin's first stroke in 1922, Stalin was elevated to the seemingly innocuous post of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a bureaucratic position designed to coordinate the functions of the various party institutions. Shrewd and ambitious, Stalin used his General Secretary position to recruit and promote party members loyal to him.

Prior to his death in 1924, Lenin recognized Stalin's concentration of power and the emerging power struggle within the party. Lenin wrote a memorandum, known as the "Testament," which concluded that Stalin was "too rude" for the elevated position of General Secretary. It appeared that Leon Trotsky, chief organizer of the Red Army and second in importance in the Communist Party, was Lenin's heir apparent. But when Lenin died, Stalin outmaneuvered Trotsky. Stalin finally eliminated Trotsky by accusing him of deviating from the party line. Trotsky's criticism of the party for not supporting world revolutions was enough to have him thrown out of the Communist Party and exiled.

By 1929, Stalin had silenced all political rivals and ruled the Soviet Union as undisputed dictator. Stalin used his power to create "socialism in one country"—an internal revolution of rapid industrialization supported by centralized agricultural production. He launched a ruthless program of forced collectivization of farmland, intending to end private production and distribution of agricultural products and to force socialism on the peasants. Millions of peasants who resisted collectivization were arrested, deported to Siberia or forced to work on massive state construction projects. Scholars have estimated that more than 10 million Soviet citizens died during the 1930s as a consequence of Stalin's policies.

RISE AND FALL OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

In 1934, Stalin, once again, turned against his own party leaders to consolidate his power. He used the murder of Sergei Kirov, a prominent Communist Party member, as an excuse to launch his "Great Purge." Stalin claimed that powerful Communist Party leaders had conspired to kill Kirov as part of a plot to overthrow the government. Evidence later uncovered by scholars indicates that Stalin himself arranged for Kirov's assassination. During the Great Purge of 1936-38, which included the Moscow "show trials," more than two million members of the Soviet government and military leadership were charged with treason or other high crimes against the party and state, brought to trial, convicted and sentenced to death. Thus, Stalin eliminated all opponents and constructed a new party and military leadership loyal to him alone. Stalin conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign to convince the Soviet people and sympathizers around the world that his Great Purge was justified to prevent enemies from overthrowing the Communist Party and its mission of building a utopian society. During Stalin's lifetime, the official party line portrayed him as a great hero of the Soviet Union, encouraging a cult of personality to develop.

Less than three years after Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev, one of the new leaders of the Communist Party, repudiated the former dictator in a sensational report to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In his speech, Khrushchev revealed Stalin's brutal use of terror and murder to force his views and leadership on the Soviet Union. Many observers and scholars have concluded that the "crimes of Stalin" revealed by Khrushchev were rooted in a corrupt system, Communism, which provides for totalitarian control and consequent abuses of power. There is an absence of well-constructed checks and balances in the political and economic systems that could effectively limit power exercised by any group or person and prevent tyranny. Others, however, have argued that the "crimes of Stalin" stemmed from the flaws of an evil person, not a corrupt form of government. In 1991, less than 75 years after the Bolshevik Revolution that brought it to power, the Soviet system of Communism collapsed, a victim of its own incapacity to fulfill the purposes of good government.

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List of Components

(15) New York Times Articles

The article dates listed below represent the date *The New York Times* published the story and may differ from the dateline at the beginning of each story, which represents the day the article was filed. Some articles have been excerpted to conserve space.

"Soviet Indicts 16 as a Terror Band Guided by Trotsky," August 15, 1936 (pp. 1-2).

"Trotsky Says 'Humbug,' of Moscow Trial; Sees a Frame-Up Worse Than Dreyfus Case," August 20, 1936 (p. 2).

"16 in Soviet Admit 2 Plots to Kill Stalin and Others," August 20, 1936 (pp. 3-4).

"6 Soviet Leaders Now Under Inquiry," August 22, 1936 (p. 5).

"Topics of the Times: The Moscow Show" (editorial), August 23, 1936 (p. 6).

"Russia Executes 16 in Anti-Soviet Plot," August 25, 1936 (p. 7).

"Russians Defend Executions," August 30, 1936 (p. 8).

"8 Generals Killed as Spies by Soviet," June 13, 1937 (p. 9).

"What Next in Russia's Stirring Drama?" June 27, 1937 (pp. 10-12).

"What Is Ivan Ivanovich Thinking?" March 25, 1956 (pp. 13-15).

"Khrushchev Talk on Stalin Bares Details of Rule Based on Terror; Charges Plot for Kremlin Purges," June 5, 1956 (pp. 16-18).

"A Revised Biography: Joseph Stalin," June 5, 1956 (p. 19).

"Record Disputes Khrushchev Line," June 6, 1956 (p. 20).

"The News of the Week in Review: Recent Russian History," June 10, 1956 (pp. 21-23).

"Why Russian Bosses Are Denouncing Stalin," June 10, 1956 (pp. 23-24).

(1) New York Times Front Page Poster

"Khrushchev Talk on Stalin Bares Details of Rule Based on Terror; Charges Plot for Kremlin Purges," June 5, 1956

(1) Video Program

Videotapes may not be reproduced and are limited solely and exclusively to single classroom exhibition.

Title: Stalin's Crimes Revealed, 1936 and 1956

Running Time: 16:44.

Contents: The video contains historical footage, still photos, background information and insightful commentary from an interview with Mitchel R. Levitas, who has had a long interest in Communist affairs and has been the editor of *The New York Times* Op-Ed page and the Book Review.

Key Events

December 1, 1934

Sergei M. Kirov, a member of the Politburo, is assassinated.

August 14-23, 1936

Stalin's first major "show trial" puts 16 political opponents on trial. Grigori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev are sentenced to death for plotting with Trotsky to overthrow Stalin's government.

January 1937

Trotsky, hero of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, gains asylum in Mexico, after being denounced by Stalin and his followers as a traitor against the Soviet Union.

January-February 1937

Thirteen top Soviet leaders are denounced as traitors and Trotskyites at Moscow "show trials," sentenced to death and executed.

February 1937

American liberals and progressives, including the philosopher John Dewey, call for impartial inquiry into the Moscow trials.

June 12, 1937

Marshal Tukhachevsky and seven generals of the Soviet army are executed after convictions as traitors at Moscow "show trials."

March 5, 1953

Joseph Stalin dies.

February 25, 1956

At 20th Congress of the Communist Party, Khrushchev denounces Stalin and charges that the Moscow "show trials" of the 1930s were crimes by a power-mad dictator against the Soviet people.

June 1956

The text of Khrushchev's speech about Stalin's crimes is published in the West.

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Suggested Activities

✻ *Divide students into small groups of three or four. Have each group select a different Bolshevik leader accused of treason during the Moscow trials and gather information about the person's life and public accomplishments. Ask each group to make a report about the person and to judge his guilt or innocence based on information collected for this report. Top Soviet leaders may include: Leon Trotsky, G.Y. Zinovieff (Zinoviev), L.B. Kameneff (Kamenev), Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Mikhail Tomsky, Alexi Rykoff (Rykov) and Marshal Tukhachevsky.*

✻ *Ask students to examine the article by Walter Duranty from The New York Times Magazine of June 27, 1937, "What Next in Russia's Stirring Drama?" Have them write a letter to The Times expressing their opinions of Duranty's report of the Moscow Purge Trials. Ask: Do you agree or disagree with Duranty's views on the trials? Why?*

✻ *Divide students into two groups. Have students of one group write a biographical sketch of Joseph Stalin. Have students of the second group write a biographical sketch of Nikita Khrushchev. Select two or three students of each group to report their biographical sketches to the class.*

✻ *Divide students into small groups of three to five members. Ask them to prepare responses to these questions: Were the crimes of Stalin an indication of fundamental flaws in the Communist system? Or were these crimes merely evidence of fundamental flaws in the personality of Stalin? Call upon members of the different groups to report their responses to the class.*

✻ *Obtain a copy of the full text of Khrushchev's speech about Stalin's crimes printed in The New York Times, June 5, 1956, on pages 13-15. The headline is: "Text of Speech on Stalin by Khrushchev as Released by the State Department." Make copies of the document and distribute them to the students. Divide the students into small groups. Ask each group to study this document and to identify several examples of Stalin's crimes. Ask each group to prepare a report for presentation to the class based on one of the following questions: 1) What were the worst crimes committed by Stalin? 2) Why did Stalin commit these crimes? 3) How did the purges affect the Soviet Union? 4) Why did Khrushchev decide to reveal these crimes? Students can also use evidence from the other materials in the module, including the video and the articles, to answer the questions.*

✻ *Have the students examine the three political cartoons contained in the articles pages. Ask them to write a short essay that explains the symbolism and point-of-view contained in each cartoon. Afterwards, begin a discussion about the effectiveness of each cartoon in describing Khrushchev's motives for revealing Stalin's crimes. Since the cartoons are American and British, what can the students conclude about the Western perspective on the effectiveness of Khrushchev's speech?*

Using the Components

Educator's Guide:

✻ Use the guide as a time-saving reference before a lecture or when preparing a lesson plan.

✻ Copy portions of the guide to hand out to students. If there is not enough time to cover the unit in detail, the introduction, vocabulary, list of players, or discussion questions can help students to grasp the concepts quickly.

Poster:

✻ Display the poster several days before beginning the unit to stimulate student inquiries and anticipation for the subject topic.

✻ Use the poster on the first day of the unit to foster an opening discussion to prime students for in-depth study or discussion later on in the unit.

✻ Punctuate an event's importance by using the poster only on the day the front page appeared chronologically in the order of events.

Video:

✻ Provide an overview of the events by showing the video at the beginning of the unit.

✻ Summarize the issues studied by showing the video at the end of the unit.

✻ Stimulate topics for independent research by displaying the video, and then direct the students to search among a variety of sources to narrow their own related topics.

Article Sheets:

✻ Select, copy and hand out only the articles best suited to fill the gaps in the textbook information or to help highlight the day's lecture topic.

✻ Copy all the article sheets into one packet and provide to the students as a research resource to answer questions, develop essays or to prepare presentations.

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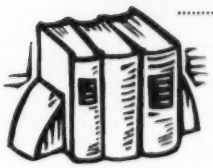
Discussion Questions

1. What were the Moscow trials of 1936-37? Why, according to Joseph Stalin and his followers, were they conducted? What was their purpose?
2. Who were the most prominent Soviet leaders purged by the Moscow trials? What were the charges against them? What happened to them?
3. How did leaders and the general public in the United States react to the Moscow trials in 1936-37? To what extent were Americans critical of or opposed to the trials and Stalin's role in them?
4. Who was Trotsky? Why was Stalin against him? What happened to him?
5. Who was Nikita Khrushchev? How did he reopen questions about the Moscow trials and Stalin's role in them? Why did he do it?
6. According to Nikita Khrushchev, what were the crimes of Joseph Stalin? Why did he commit them? What were the consequences for the Soviet Union and its people?
7. How did leaders and the general public in the United States react to Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's crimes? To what extent did Americans agree with Khrushchev about the behavior of Stalin?
8. How did the press in the United States cover the crimes of Stalin revealed by Khrushchev? How did coverage of Khrushchev's speech against Stalin compare with coverage of the Moscow trials of 1936-37? Was the American press coverage of the 1930s too accommodating to Stalin or too unconcerned about his actions?
9. Do you agree with Khrushchev's speech against Stalin? Do you believe his charges that Stalin committed crimes against the Soviet Union and its people?
10. What was the short-run and long-run historical significance of Khrushchev's speech against Stalin? How did it influence the course of world history in the 20th century?



Suggested Reading

The Great Terror: A Reassessment,
by Robert M. Conquest. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Stalin and the Kirov Murder,
by Robert M. Conquest. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

The Dream That Failed: Reflections on the Soviet Union,
by Walter Laqueur. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991,
by Martin E. Malia. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism,
by Roy A. Medvedev. New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

Khrushchev: The Years in Power,
by Roy A. and Zhores A. Medvedev. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.

Stalin in Power: The Revolution From Above, 1928-1941,
by Robert C. Tucker. New York: Norton, 1990.

The Communists: The Story of Power and Lost Illusions, 1948-1991,
by Adam B. Ulam. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992.

Stalin Against the Jews,
by Arkadii Vaksberg. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

Lenin: A New Biography,
by Dmitrii A. Volkogonov. New York: The Free Press, 1994.

Russia Under Khrushchev,
by Alexander Werth. New York: Hill and Wang, 1962.

The New York Times Live from the PAST

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List of Players

(The names listed represent how the names appeared in The New York Times when the articles in this unit were written; the names in parentheses represent today's commonly accepted spellings.)

Nikolai Bulganin *Prime Minister of the U.S.S.R (1955-58) who lost his position to Nikita Khrushchev.*

Sergei Kiroff (Kirov) *Member of the Soviet Politburo who was assassinated in 1934. Stalin used Kirov's murder as a pretext for beginning his "show trials."*

Nikita Khrushchev *First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, 1953-1964 and Prime Minister after 1958. In 1956, he attacked Stalin in a speech to the 20th Party Congress.*

Vladimir Lenin (also called Nikolai) *First Communist ruler of the U.S.S.R. from the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 until his death in 1924.*

Vyacheslav Molotov (Viacheslav Molotov) *A major Communist leader under Stalin. His power and status declined after Khrushchev's exposé of Stalin's crimes in 1956.*

Joseph Stalin *Dictator of the Soviet Union from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. He ruthlessly purged the Communist Party of any potential rivals in the 1930's.*

Leon Trotsky *A main leader of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and Commissar for War in the Soviet government, who was exiled in 1927.*

Major Communist leaders purged during Stalin's "show trials":

Nicolai Bukharin *Communist Party leader executed in 1938.*

Leon Kameneff (Lev Kamenev) *Communist Party leader executed in 1936.*

Mikhail Tukhachevsky *A Marshal of the Red Army of the Soviet Union, executed in 1937.*

Gregory Zinovieff (Grigori Zinoviev) *Communist Party leader executed in 1936.*

VOCABULARY

BOLSHEVIK
Russian word for "the majority," used by Lenin to name his political party. From 1918-1952, the name Bolshevik was part of the official title of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Bolsheviks were never a majority but a ruling elite that controlled the masses. Many original Bolsheviks were purged by Stalin.

CHEKA
Name of the secret political police established by the Bolsheviks. Used to crush all opposition to Lenin and his party. Established the foundation for a totalitarian state. In 1922, the Cheka were replaced by the GPU, a new secret police with extraordinary powers to eliminate opponents of the Communist Party.

COMMUNIST PARTY
This is the party of Lenin, which created the Soviet Union and under Stalin established a totalitarian dictatorship.

CONGRESS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF THE SOVIET UNION
The All-Union Congress met every four years to discuss and approve programs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Central Committee conducted Communist Party business between Congresses.

KOLKHOZY
The name for the large collective farms that were created by pooling together the property of Russian peasants.

KULAKS
Peasants who resisted collectivization of private agriculture. Millions of Kulaks were killed or sent to forced-labor camps in Siberia by Stalin's political police for resisting the government's policy.

PATRIOTIC WAR
The name given by Soviet leaders to World War II.

POLITBURO
This Political Bureau was the supreme policy-making group of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which held the dominant power to rule the USSR.

PURGES
This term was applied to Joseph Stalin's intimidation and elimination of opponents. Reached its pinnacle in the mid-1930s during the so-called Moscow "show trials."

TROTSKYITE
Stalin used this term to describe his foes during the purges of the 1930s and to associate them with the discredited former Communist Party leader, Leon Trotsky.

UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS (U.S.S.R)
The official name of the country established by the Bolsheviks following their revolution of 1917 that brought them to power in Russia.

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